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## Children's critical evaluation of parental mediation

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### Abstract

*Although the new sociology of childhood draws attention to societal influences on children's experiences, it also sees them as active agents. This article investigates children's perspectives on parental interventions in regards their use of the internet, an aspect not covered in the parental mediation literature. Although children are generally positive about this mediation, here we explore cases where children consider it to be problematic through analysing the EU Kids Online qualitative research conducted in nine countries. The material shows how parental advice can sometimes be less articulated, justified, and expressed in a sensitive manner, and why it sometimes lacks credibility in children's eyes. The article illustrates how maturing children can develop a sense of social expectations about independence, trust and personal social space. This can have a bearing on how they evaluate parental monitoring. Lastly, the article examines factors inhibiting children's willingness to confide in parents about sensitive issues, because of potential parental responses, parenting styles, and a fear of losing parental trust that children have gained as they have grown older.*

**Keywords:** parental mediation, children, internet, qualitative research, EU Kids Online, new sociology of childhood

### Introduction: Theoretical Frameworks

Several strands of sociological enquiry provide the overall framework for this article. The first is the new sociology of childhood that draws attention to how childhood is a social construction. Expectations of children, their degree of independence, their roles, what adults believe they should know or not know, are different in different cultures and at different points in time (James & Prout, 1997). This approach also views parenthood as a social construction, involving discourses about what counts as good parenting, and what parents should be protecting their children from and how. But while drawing attention to the wider social influences on children's and parents' understandings and expectations of their roles, this literature also underlines how children can be active agents in this process (Prout, 2008). That will be the key focus of this article.

Various writers have followed up on the theme of how the experience of childhood can change over time. The most well-known is Giddens (1991) who wrote on the de-traditionalization of the family, whereby families have become less authoritarian, allowing more negotiation with children (for a review of related literature see Williams & Williams, 2005). Of particular interest in this article are the observations about how children have acquired more autonomy from their parents, reflected in more privacy. Pasquier (2008) discussed how children first acquired more spatial autonomy as many gained their own bedrooms as personalised spaces, giving rise to 'bedroom culture' (Livingstone, 2002). Children also gained more cultural autonomy in consuming technologies and cultural products mainly marketed at them and developed more relational autonomy in terms of their private communications with peers, enhanced by the mobile phone and the internet. Pasquier argued that many parents have come to respect a degree of

privacy, but children also guard it, an infringement being the equivalent of a parent looking at children's personal letters or their personal diaries. Empirical evidence seems to support this argument (Livingstone, 2009). However, writers on the changing experience of childhood have acknowledged that much depends on the age of children, some stressing how parents 'manage' their children's independence, giving them more freedom as they feel their children are becoming more responsible (Nafus & Tracey, 2002).

If the above provides an account of more general changes in children's experiences and parental responses, the process can be more complex when we consider specific areas of children's lives. There has been a long history of particular concerns about children's experience of traditional media and more recently of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Critcher 2008). In relation to the internet, these concerns have been formulated in terms of online 'risks,' examples of which would include encountering sexual content online, contacting strangers online, and cyberbullying (Livingstone, Haddon, & Görzig, 2012). Hence, governments and other 'stakeholders' (e.g. NGOs responsible for children's welfare) provide advice to parents about children's online risks and what parents should do about these risks. The contradiction is that while in many respects children are gaining greater autonomy there is more pressure on parents to check and regulate their children's ICT use, and intervene to manage risk (Livingstone, 2002).

## **Parental Mediation**

A body of literature has emerged on 'parental mediation' documenting how, why, and with what consequences parents try to influence their children's experience of ICTs. To make a link to the above framework, this entails empirical research that identifies the best parenting practices that can inform the advice given to parents in order to influence the way they go about fulfilling their role as parents.

This parental mediation literature, much of it consisting of quantitative research based in psychology, first addressed parents' interventions in their children's use of television (e.g. Austin, 1993; Desmond, Singer, Singer, Calam, & Colimore, 1985; Valkenburg, Krmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999). Hence, typologies of the strategies used in this mediation process have evolved over the last thirty years. These typologies were later adapted to take into account the affordances of the internet – for example, considering parents' ability to monitor electronically which sites children have visited by looking at their web browser histories (Eastin, Greenberg, & Hofschire, 2006; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Although there are some commonalities in these typologies of parental mediation, the differences between them have also reflected how many and which factors were taken into account. To take some recent examples, Mascheroni (2014) included parents' more general parenting styles in her typology; Lambert, Wagner, and Gebel (2014) took into account parents' evaluation of the new media for media education, and their degree of child orientation/sensitivity; and Valkenburg, Taylor Piotrowski, Hermans, and Leeuw (2013) added the style or manner in which parents mediate.

The parental mediation tradition has been criticised for focusing on parents' responses to the potential negative effects of media, rather than on their interventions to achieve more positive family goals (Clark, 2011). The critique in this article is that this literature has not asked how children perceive and react to parental mediation - the child's viewpoint is usually not included in these writings. Yet, children may to varying degrees question the risk agenda outlined earlier or they may have reservations about particular parental interventions, which in turn may influence whether they accept parental advice or how they otherwise engage with their parents. This child's perspective will be explored in this article.

Although the parental mediation research has not usually tried to capture the child's perspective, there have been some useful discussions in this literature that can inform this research goal. The first concerns parental styles of mediation, where 'autonomy-supportive' parenting offers 'structure and guidance but takes the child's feelings and perspective seriously providing a convincing rationale for behavioural requests and rule-making' (Valkenburg et al., 2013 p. 449). In contrast to more 'controlling' or 'inconsistent' styles, Valkenburg et al. argued that 'autonomy-support' parenting was more likely to elicit a positive response from children. In other words, there are some suggestions about how parenting style might affect children's evaluation of that mediation. The second guide to what research on children's perspectives might consider emerges from a discussion of 'social domains' - i.e. areas of life where children feel that their parents' interventions are less or more justified (Smetena, 1995). Valkenburg et al. (2013) argued that in the 'personal domain,' which covers individual preferences and choices rather than accepted norms (i.e. about friendships, clothes and media use), children are more likely to resist parents' interventions. Although it might be interesting to explore in more depth whether the social domain makes a difference to children's responses, this raises a broader issue of under what conditions parental authority is perceived by children to be less or more legitimate.

## **The *EU Kids Online* Project**

It is against this backdrop that this article reports on the eight years of work of the multi-disciplinary *EU Kids Online* project (2006-2014; [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net)) funded by the European Commission under what was initially called the *Safer Internet Programme* (subsequently renamed *Better Internet for Kids*). The project itself arose from stakeholder concerns about the various online risks noted above. The participating project members examined relevant empirical evidence on risk experiences (e.g. building a database of and reviewing European research, conducting a survey) but also commented on those very perceptions of risk. For example, an analysis comparing newspaper coverage on online risks in Europe found that coverage of different risks varied by country (Haddon & Stald, 2009; Ponte, Bauwens, & Mascheroni, 2009). In other words, parents in different countries are sensitised to the different risks reported by their national media.

While the major part of the project focused on the risk experiences of children, some of the research examined issues of parental mediation. For example, the *EU Kids Online* European literature review (Kirwil, 2009; Kirwil, Garmendia, Garitaonandia, & Martínez, 2009) and subsequent 2010 survey of 9-16 year old children and their parents investigated the types of mediation strategies that parents used and preferred (Pasquier, Simões, & Kredens, 2012). In addition, *EU Kids Online* researchers considered the consequences of parental mediation in terms of the effectiveness of different types of mediation in either reducing those experiences that parents perceived as being risks or ameliorating any negative feelings felt by children (Garmendia, Gariatonandia, Martinez, & Casado, 2012). The researchers also developed further typologies of parent-child relationships (Paus-Hasebrink, Bauwens, Dürager, & Ponte, 2013).

Lastly, one of the guiding principles of the project was its child-centric orientation (Livingstone et al., 2012). *EU Kids Online* aimed to give children a voice and hear their perspectives in order to appreciate their responses to risk experiences. However, that underlying orientation meant that it also examined how children perceived and evaluated parental interventions, providing insights for the key research questions to be elaborated below.

### **Children's Evaluations of Parental Mediation: The *EU Kids Online* Survey Findings**

We can first set the scene with a quantitative overview from the 2010 survey data relating to this issue (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Allowing for some variation in age, at one level children's reactions to parental mediation appeared to be generally positive (Haddon, 2012). A majority of children regarded these parental interventions as helpful, with younger children finding such interventions slightly more helpful than older children. In fact, 72% of children thought that their parents took the right level of interest in what they did, with only a few wanting more or less intervention. Similar patterns were found for younger and older children.

In general, one of the main parental strategies was to talk to children, which was noted by 73% of 9-12 year olds and 66% of 13-16 year olds, indicating very little difference in terms of age (Livingstone et al., 2011). As a consequence, 68% of children thought that their parents knew a lot or a little about what they did online. Moreover 64% of children did not simply ignore parental requests. The results are more detailed, and hence nuanced, than can be summarised here. Nevertheless this overview paints a broad picture with numbers of children's favourable evaluation of and response to parental mediation.

However, there is one important caveat relating specifically to online risks. The *EU Kids Online* survey had shown that although children often told parents what they did online, this was less so in the case of sensitive risk issues. For example, of the children who had seen sexual images online, only 35% of their parents knew about this experience, and there were almost equivalent figures for being cyberbullied, receiving sexting messages, and meeting face-to-face with a stranger they previously met online (Livingstone et al., 2011). Furthermore, if the experience was problematic or if they were 'bothered' or 'upset' by the experience, more children said that they preferred to talk about it with peers rather than with parents (e.g. 52% talked with a peer with 42% with a parent about being cyberbullied). One related finding from US research was that even when parents had proactively talked to children about various risks when problematic online experiences occurred that previous active mediation did not make the children any more willing to talk to the parents about those problems (Priebe, Mitchel, & Finkelhor, 2013). In sum, there appears to be a difference between children's general willingness to talk to parents about online experiences and their reticence to talk about their experience of online risks.

## **The *EU Kids Online* Qualitative Study: Research Questions**

Now we turn to the main evidence reported in this article. This is derived from the follow-up qualitative research in the broader *EU Kids Online* project, investigating children's perspectives and responses in more detail than in the survey (Smahel & Wright, 2014). Although overall the study was mainly focused on perceptions of risks and related preventative and coping behaviour, some time was spent in interviews and focus groups asking children about their experience of parental mediation as well as mediation by peers, teachers and other family members. In particular, the research explored the factors that affected those perceptions of mediation and why children reacted more and less favourably to some mediational strategies as compared to others. One research question, relating to the discussions above, concerned how children evaluated parental advice and in particular how children perceived the legitimacy of parental interventions.

Despite little evidence of age differences in some of the statistics cited above, the researchers also had an interest in how the age of the child had a bearing on his or her perceptions and responses. The practice of parents giving their children more choices about online activities, and generally more freedom as they matured is discussed in the sociological and parental mediation literatures. To explore this in more detail from the child's perspective, another research question concerned what rights and responsibilities children thought that they should have as they grew older, with a particular focus on issues of privacy.

Finally, since the statistics have shown that children were more reluctant to talk to parents about sensitive (or risk) areas, the third research question concerned the specific processes at work in relation to these issues. In particular, what types of parental response did the children anticipate they would get, reflecting some of the parental styles discussed above, if they talked to parents about these experiences? And could these responses make them more or less willing to confide in parents?

### **Method**

The main fieldwork for the qualitative research was carried out from February to September 2013, following revisions after piloting the interview and focus group topic guides. The focus groups and interviews were conducted with children aged 9–16 in nine countries: Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The choice of countries reflected those national teams within the 33-country *EU Kids Online* network that were interested in and thought they could conduct a qualitative study in their respective countries. The research mainly took place in schools, but some were held in youth centres. The choice of which children were free to be interviewed often depended on the teachers who acted as intermediaries, but overall this process produced a range of children with different socio-demographic backgrounds and educational capabilities. On average there were six focus groups in each country, three of girls and three of boys, and one each for 9–10, 11–13, and 14–16 year olds. There was an average of 12 interviews in each country, six for boys and six for girls, with the same age distribution as for the focus groups. The participating children had internet access at home and used the internet every day or several times a week.

Focus groups and interviews were transcribed in the national language of each country then a first level of coding focused on condensed descriptions of the material in English. This first level of coded comments from the interviews were transferred into an Excel file where they received a secondary level of coding so that for each point made by a child it was clear whether and what ICTs were involved, whether and what risks were involved, who was being discussed, whether the theme was about activities, communication, mediation of some kind, etc. The coding meant that it was possible to search the Excel sheets by various criteria, whether looking into specific risks, preventative measures, coping strategies, or parental mediation. This material enabled the various analysts to capture overall tendencies within the sample, the range of experiences and diverse examples of the same theme. When children are cited but not directly quoted, the material often comes from this strand of the analysis.

Parallel to this, quotations that related to previous project-wide discussions of the whole area were translated to make them accessible to all the other researchers when they collectively wrote the pan-European report. These translations often became the basis for the main quotations in this report, either because they summarised certain issues, captured ambivalences, or demonstrated a theme well. Two points need to be made in this respect. Since in the division of labour the author of the current article had planned to write up the parental mediation material even before interviewing, the UK interviews often pushed questions on this topic a little further and hence UK quotations often produced more detailed comments. Second, the 'interesting points' for translation were, in the UK case, already in English. Therefore, it was easy to collate many of them. There were a limited number of translations in many other

countries, having to cover all topics, and so the pool of potential quotations relating specifically to parental mediation was often smaller. Both processes led to a greater representation of UK children in the material below.

## **Children's Evaluations of Parental Advice**

### ***Clarity, justification and style of advice***

Children reported that parents differed in the degree to which they articulated why they were concerned about children's behaviour. Some parents specifically explained that giving out personal information might lead to the house being robbed or email accounts being hacked, or that talking to strangers might lead to the child being abducted. Below is an example of why one child's parents were concerned about violence:

Interviewer: *So, what is it that your parents don't like about the violence when it looks like real people? Did they explain? Did they say?*

Lawrence: *Yes. They say it's because there are so many wars, and so many real people die, it's just not good to be doing that on a computer. It's basically the same as killing people in real life. It gives you the idea, you start to think, 'Oh my God, this is really fun. It's a cool game. I might go and do this for real.' So they don't like that.*

(Boy, 9-10, UK)

This is one of many examples where the parents have been explicit about rules and articulated their concerns. However, not all parental views and rules are so explicit – at least from the children's perspective. For example, one UK girl (11–13) reported how she was sure that her mother would not like her to encounter bad language, even though her mother had never said this. Another UK girl (11–13) said that her mother had warned her not to watch violent things, but that her mother had not explained why. One Italian girl (9–10) reported that her mother had told her brother to avoid sharing pictures on *Facebook* because generally "bad things may happen." Meanwhile, a Greek boy's (9) parents had simply said, "It's bad to see such things," when warning him about seeing sexual content. The mother of another Greek boy (9) had said he could not have his own *Skype* account (he currently used his mother's) but she had not explained why – he planned to ask her. Clearly, parents differed in the degree to which they clarified why they were concerned about some behaviour, with some providing a reason, yet others simply labelling something online as being "bad." In certain interviews, the impression arose that parents were sometimes embarrassed to talk about certain concerns, especially sexual matters, which in turn made children reluctant to raise the issue with them.

Therefore, this reluctance of parents to talk about some issues created a degree of uncertainty among children, who liked to know what the rules were and why. For example, the Italian girl below had asked her parents whether she could go on *Facebook* when she reached the age of 14, but so far her parents had not given an answer:

Elisa: *My parents start saying that they have to think it over and then change the subject. I mean how do you think I'll ever learn what to do and what not to do if you change the subject? Tell me 'No' or 'Yes' but argue it with me so that I can understand ...or to me it is like a punishment.*

(Girl, 11–13, Italy)

Capturing academic discussions of parenting styles noted above, in some cases children were critical of the manner which parents used, illustrated in this Belgian example:

Willem: *This morning. We were having a discussion with our mum that we didn't like. She called us 'addicted losers,' and yeah...I know we were online for too long. But she could also say just in a normal tone, 'Time's up, you're online for too long, so you should stop now and play outside.' But she yells: 'Go play outside.' But it's raining...*

Interviewer: *[laughs]*

Willem: *Or like, 'Go and do something else.' But yeah, what should we do? So they don't understand. That's just all new things to them, Skype and other websites. It's just all new.*

(Boy, 9, Belgium)

### ***Credibility of advice***

The end of the above quotation also captures one of the factors that can undermine the credibility of advice: the perception that parents do not really understand the online world or particular ICTs. For example, one Italian girl (11–13) was disappointed by her parents' belief that she was online all day long

instead of studying, simply because she left the smartphone switched on for checking *WhatsApp* from time to time.

While many of the youngest children and slightly older children were more willing to accept the rationale for their parents' concerns, some of the older children were beginning to question parents' claims about why things might be bad for children. For example, in a UK focus group the boys (11–13) felt parental advice was confusing because their parents asked them to avoid looking at violence online, yet the boys saw it regularly on the TV news in terms of war coverage. Similarly, the boys had been asked by their parents to avoid sexual material and yet these children pointed out that they could see pictures of topless women in some of the popular daily newspapers. In other words, in the children's eyes, the parents had lost perspective because their fears about the online world were out of proportion given what children already encountered in the offline one.

Some children simply questioned their parents' evaluation, as when one parent of a UK girl (11–13) complained about her daughter illegally downloading television content (such as the Simpsons cartoon). The girl responded: "*[She's concerned] that I'll get a criminal record. I don't get why. I mean, I'm not...no one's getting killed or hurt.*"

Other children thought that some advice was too universal if adults implied that children would automatically be influenced by the online world:

*Huzaifah: My parent doesn't say this, but some parents will say if you constantly play this game you'll be addicted and it will affect your mentality. And you'll try to copy what's happening in the game in real life. But to be honest I find that a bit... I don't really agree with that statement because it depends on who you are, and it depends on if you are smart enough to do it or not. And it also depends on parenting as well.*  
(Boy, 11–13, UK)

Finally, yet other children thought they could use more refined strategies to protect themselves rather than the blanket bans proposed by parents. For example, one UK boy (11–13) had been warned by parents about communicating with people he did not know when playing online in multiplayer games. But he had decided that it was safe enough as long as he talked about innocuous subjects, like the game itself, and stopped communicating if people online asked for personal information.

Overall, children reported that much of the advice from parents was clear and justified. However, there are examples of how it can also be less well articulated, lack justifications, or be presented in an insensitive manner, all of which can be problematic from the child's perspective. The other issue is when various factors undermine the credibility of parental advice, for example, because of parental ignorance of the technology, where the advice seems to have lost perspective, or where it is seen to be too universal.

## **Inviting and Resisting Parental Interventions**

Many of the younger children (9–10) simply accepted what their parents wanted of them. If they were unsure about a website, they might ask a parent to check it for them before continuing. This sometimes included asking parents to check the URLs that their peers had recommended, in cases where they trusted their parents' judgement more than that of their peers. Most of the younger children noted that if they encountered problems, they would always tell their parents, while the slightly older children sometimes said that they might, but it depended on the nature of the problem.

This practice of the children checking with parents before encounter something online – i.e. a preventative measure – was by and large unproblematic. In fact, some children were even more proactive, inviting parents to see what they were doing online, and some were not so much following parental rules as trying themselves to avoid certain online experiences. This was illustrated by one boy (9–10) from the UK who wanted his parents to intervene and vet sites for him to see if they had images of dead animals, since he wanted to avoid seeing these.

*Andrew: Some people put things on websites that are not very nice, like some pictures have some not very nice stuff so like...killing stuff...I'm not one of those persons who likes looking at killed animals, so...my mum and my dad have a look and make sure that there's nothing on there.*

*Interviewer: Right. Have you ever had this experience that you've come across a site that is violent to animals or gruesome or something like that?*

Andrew: *Well, one time I went on the website and there was a not very nice thing on there...so I know now to tell me dad to go and have a look at it first.*

Interviewer: *Right. So you were a bit upset about this or...?*

Andrew: *Well, I was a bit upset when I looked at it. But I know now that one of my parents will have a look at it and if it was something bad, like they wouldn't show me it.*

(Boy, 9-10)

Another form of checking up on children was for parents to ask them about what they were doing online, or to ask children to show the parents what they were doing. For example, one UK boy (10–11) had to let his parents know whenever he was watching YouTube and indicate what he was watching. (In fact, he found this so tedious that he gave up watching YouTube.) Many children were happy with this “light” degree of monitoring and complied, although occasionally some thought their parents were gullible and lied about what they did online.

Older children also explained why they started to check in less with their parents. A number felt that they had reached an age when they should be more independent and that it was not always appropriate to ask their parents if they were doing the right thing, even though they admitted that they sometimes found it difficult to evaluate certain aspects of the online world.

Interviewer: *Do you think you're going to get more adventurous in the future...try more things out or...?*

Francis: *Yeah. Because when I'm older I'll become more...like...brave. Not like I'll try everything...because you've got to be safe on the internet. And the internet's like...tough for someone like me, a 12-year-old.*

Interviewer: *Why...you mean it's complicated or what?*

Francis: *You don't know about stuff and you don't really want to ask your parents at that time, like when you're like 12, 13. You want to try and do stuff on your own. But when you're older you can try and just figure it out for yourself. 'Cos you're older, you're more wiser.*

(Boy, 11-13, UK)

Another process at work as children got older was when some had proudly noted that when they were younger they were in general monitored more, but as they got older, they had behaved in such a responsible way that they had earned more trust. This also applied to what they did online. However, this whole issue of trust could be problematic as was shown in the ambivalence for one UK girl (11-13) whose mother had said to her daughter that she trusted her, but then proceeded to check what she was doing online. To this girl, this monitoring, this form of parental mediation, did not imply trust in her eyes.

Among these older children, there were more examples of resentment about parents' monitoring of what they were doing. For example, one UK boy (11–13) sometimes felt this was not because he was doing anything that his parents would not like – for instance, he might be watching cartoons. He simply valued his privacy: *“It's my personal time.”* One specific form of intervention mentioned by children of all ages was the more invasive monitoring whereby parents checked the histories of the websites that they had visited (and sometimes the YouTube sites visited and games they had played, more so for younger children). This occurred across countries, and while, by and large, younger children (and even some older children) did not mind, it was sometimes starting to become an issue for the older ones. Several mentioned the dilemma that they might not like it in principle, but if they were to protest against it, it would look as if they have something to hide – and, once again, they might lose any trust that they had earned.

In one focus group of 11- to 13-year-old, UK girls thought that their parents were more protective than they needed to be, but their discussion illustrates the ambivalent feelings that children can have about parental interventions, acknowledging that it is sometimes desirable and indeed a parent's responsibility.

Interviewer: *Is this an issue, or are you quite happy for your parents to check?*

Rawan: *It's an issue because...you want your life to be private. Everybody butts in to your life, and that kind of gets annoying at times.*

Josie: *Yeah*

Shelley: *But at the same time, you don't want it to seem like you're hiding something, because you've done nothing wrong.*

Anabel: *Yeah.*

Shelley: *You're just talking to your friends and families, but obviously they might have heard from someone else that someone did this and that. And after they worry and they want to check your profile.*

Fahima: *Yes, but then sometimes it could be good, because sometimes if you're struggling...something's going on on Facebook, like you maybe added a friend that's trying to bully you. Your parents should see it, because if you keep quiet your parents don't bother to check about it, then...*

Rawan: *It's going to hurt you.*

Fahima: *It's going to hurt you or cause you problems. Yes. But a lot of times you do need your parents to see.*

Interviewer: *So, what you might call a mixed blessing, then, isn't it? All right. Would you say your parents get it right, or that they're more worried than you think they should be?*

Josie: *They're more worried than they should be.*

Rawan: *Yeah. But maybe they don't think they're worrying too much.*

Shelley: *Because they're parents, they probably have a duty to worry, as well.*

Interviewer: *Mm-hmm. What, because your parents' parents worried about them when they were young, so they've got to do it now?*

All: *Yeah.* [nod agreement]

(Girls, 11-13, UK)

In fact, the oldest children were articulate about wanting privacy from their parents not so much because they were doing anything dubious (or "dodgy" in the discussion below), but because interactions with peers were different in nature from interactions with parents, and these young people wanted to keep the two social worlds apart.

Mary: *My dad only let me go on Facebook because I asked him about two months before, and he had to talk it over with my mum before he let me go on it. And he made sure he knew the password to it, even though I've changed it a couple of years later because he kept logging on and seeing what I was doing. So I was, like, sort of, under parental supervision. And then I don't... First rule of Facebook, I got told by everyone, was, never add your parents as your Friends, because then they'll see everything you're up to!*

Interviewer: *Are there things that you don't want them to see?*

Mary: *No, it's just like, it's a bit more private. It's you and your friends.*

Isadora: *Yes, because the way you act around your friends isn't always how you act around your parents, even if it's not anything that would be...*

Interviewer: *Dodgy.*

Isadora: *Yes, dodgy or anything like that. And still, you know, it's different to how you act around them.*

(Girls, 14-16, UK)

In fact, these older children were not only thinking about their 'rights' to privacy from invasive checking, but also the moral issue from seeing parents as increasingly becoming equals, and, as Roland argues below, he would never dream of checking up on his mother.

Mathew: *When I was at home, my dad occasionally takes my phone. I'm like, 'Okay'. [i.e., he was not happy about this] And then, like, he has a little flick around on it, check maybe even on the history I don't even know and then gives it back to me. And I was like, 'Okay.'*

Interviewer: *He doesn't talk to you about that?*

Mathew: *No, he just takes it for a minute and then gives it back.*

Roland: *Yes, that's what my mom does, she kind of goes through my instant messaging to see who I've been talking to, what I've been talking about.*

Interviewer: *With you there or when you're not there?*

Roland: *Well, when I'm not there. She does do it sometimes when I'm in the house.*

David: *Because I don't want anyone checking my Twitter, like, what I'm saying to my friends or my text, what I'm saying.*

Jack: *There's a couple of things you say to your friends you would never dream about saying to your parents.*

Roland: *I think if my mum wants to see what I was writing, it's not that I'd be writing bad stuff, it's just I think it's an invasion of my privacy. Because I wouldn't ask my mum to see her text messages that she's sending to her friends. And I doubt she'd hand over her phone to let me see what she's talking about. So I don't see why she should do it to me.*

(Boys, 14-16, UK)

In the light of the above, it is not surprising that some of the young people went out of their way to conceal what they were doing. For example, one UK boy (11-13) managed to do all his homework and he was reasonably successful at school, but he sometimes also played games when his parents thought he should have been studying. Therefore, he regularly deleted histories of his gaming activities online and



replaced them with more “respectable” ones by doing a few quick searches. One Portuguese boy (12) generally did not mind his father checking what he did, and he had nothing to hide. Nevertheless, when he wanted a more private conversation with peers, he used *Skype* because his father did not have the *Skype* password. Sometimes when parents demanded to know the child’s SNS password, the children initially gave it to them, then changed it later. And a number of UK children mentioned that even though their parents had not necessarily asked for their children’s passwords, they knew that their parents were secretly trying to find out what their password was. Overall, in some households there appeared to be guerrilla warfare going on where parents were secretly trying to find out what their children were doing, while their children tried to prevent this from happening.

In sum, while younger children are often more accepting of parental monitoring and advice, and sometimes request it, a number of processes are taking place from the children’s perspective as they get older. One is the feeling that they should be more independent, sometimes meaning that they check in less with parents. Another is that they feel that they have earned the right to be trusted. And a third is that in the process of becoming adults they have earned the right to degrees of privacy from parents. That said, children can have mixed feelings, putting themselves in the position of the parents, and understanding their perspective. They can also face dilemmas about how to handle parental demands that they are uncomfortable with because this goes against how they think they should be treated as they get older. But it also means that sometimes they conceal things from parents if they think it is going to be problematic, especially if it threatens to undermine trust.

### **Inhibitors to Confiding in Parents about Problematic Experiences**

First, it is worth noting that some children may be mortified by the thought that their parents would see something inappropriate on their screen, even if it was there by accident. For some, like the Portuguese (9–10) girl below, this was what “bothered” her about the internet rather than what she actually encountered there:

*Interviewer: If you think about girls and boys your age, what do you think are the most unpleasant things that can happen online?*

*Diana: It can get ruined and sometimes when that happens, like that sex thing, when you can't remove it and it stays a long time. Then sometimes when people see that they think it's because I wanted to see that, but it's not! And then they blame me and I have to be grounded, and that's a lie. But I can't say anything to explain what happened...*  
(Girl, 9–10, Portugal)

This also highlights how the fear of punishment can inhibit children from talking to parents. Some parents have withdrawn children’s access to the internet as a response to something the child had done online. But there can be other punishments as in the case of the Spanish boy (10), whose parents had told him that if he watched certain things on the internet he would not be allowed to play on his Nintendo for a month. Certainly some children indicated that they would not tell their parents of some experiences in case of such punishments in one form or another.

Part of the problem, also indicated in the quote above, was if the children experienced something online, even if not initiated by them, their parents might blame them for the experience. Indeed, some children noted that since their parents were less internet-savvy, they would not appreciate that sexual pop-ups or links that unexpectedly took you to sexual sites were a fact of life online. Hence, it was best not to risk telling their parents.

*Interviewer: If something that came on the internet that you thought was wrong or problematic, would you tell them...if they're not very good with technology?*

*Mathew: Well, you could have, say you accidentally went on to inappropriate site and then your parents suddenly start questioning you about this because maybe they saw you. And straight away they're going to judge you. Because even if you say by accident they're probably not even going to believe you.*  
(Boy, 11-13, UK)

For other children, more important than any punishment involving the loss of access to technology was the anticipated reaction of their parents, such as their parents becoming angry with them. They feared such reactions the most.

*Patricia: It is also a problem with parents, anything you do they will tell you off. So, if you fear you may be told off, or punished, or something you don't tell them and that's when things*

happen.

Interviewer: *Because maybe it seems as if you have gone looking for it, or...I don't know...*

Patricia: *If someone started saying those [bullying] things to me I don't know if I could tell my mother, because she would just say to me, 'And what are you doing talking with this person or this person?' And I would feel worse, and things would be worse, if someone was reminding me all the time that I had done something wrong the last thing I need is someone shouting at me or telling me off. What I need is for someone to understand me, to listen to me and help me.*

Clara: *Better a friend than your parents...although maybe she wouldn't be able to do much either.*

Laura: *Or a friend's parents.*

(Girls, 11–13, Spain)

These responses reflect children's desire for the autonomy-supportive parenting style where parents would show more sensitivity to the child's feelings and perspectives. A variation of this is the fear that parents would be critical of them.

Natalia: *I would tell my sister, not my parents. Because they would say, 'why do you use the webcam?' That's exactly what they would say. Or: 'You're stupid.'*

(Girl, 14–16, Spain)

But a different type of concern was over the fear of losing their parents' trust if they told them about their experiences online.

Interviewer: *So what type of things would you not want to ask your parents about? Would it be things where they would think you're not so competent if you ask them? Or what?*

Francis: *Like...stuff where I go on it. It could be like they don't trust me on some sites. And then they would start checking my history and all that.*

Interviewer: *So if you like...the dilemma is how not to lose your parents' trust?*

Francis: [Quickly] *Yeah, like you've got to stay on a safe website so you don't lose your parents' trust. Really...that's all it is.*

(Boy, 11-13, UK)

As noted earlier, trust was, for some children, precious, and although one might think a trusting relationship between parents and children encouraged openness – which it sometimes did – this was not always the case, and could lead to an inhibition in talking about sensitive internet issues.

Finally, a number of children mentioned the sheer embarrassment of talking about some things with parents, as in the case of the Italian (9–10) girl who accidentally came across sexual images:

Interviewer: *Do you happen to tell your parents what you have seen?*

Alice: *I prefer not to talk about it.*

Interviewer: *Why?*

Alice: *I don't like talking about these issues. I, it's bad. I mean...also because it is normal to find this kinds of things nowadays, I think.*

(Girl, 9–10, Italy)

This section has shown that over and above any general concerns about privacy there are a range of particular factors that can contribute to children's unwillingness to tell their parents about specifically problematic experiences online, or at least ones that are sensitive and where there may be parental rules. This can range from fear of being punished or criticised, including not being believed, to fear of losing parental trust or simply being embarrassed.

## Discussion

To put the material discussed here into context, and reflecting the survey data, many of the children interviewed, of all ages, regarded parental advice and interventions positively, and a number were even willing to talk to their parents about more sensitive issues. However, this was not the focus of this article, so much as understanding when, in the child's eyes, parental interventions could be problematic.

As regards the first research question on children's evaluation of parental advice, children's responses reflected what Valkenburg et al. (2013) had posited, that 'autonomy-supportive' parenting might be more effective than more 'controlling' or 'inconsistent' parental mediation styles. From the evidence presented

here we can at least say that (in the opposite spirit to the autonomy-supportive parenting style) when given a voice children can be critical when mediation was poorly or not at all articulated, when it was not well justified and when it was conducted in an insensitive manner. These are very specific elements, not identical to 'controlling' and 'inconsistent' styles, which suggests scope for developing this typology further, adding more nuances. Meanwhile we saw how Smetena's (1995) work on social domains had opened the way for thinking about the broader issue of under what circumstances children feel parental mediation is legitimate. In the *EU Kids Online* study, legitimacy was touched upon in terms of factors undermining the credibility of some parental advice. Children mentioned cases in which parental mediation was based on a poor understanding of how the digital world worked, where it seemed to lack perspective, or was too universal. Thus, by giving children a voice we can see the bases on which they make judgements, judgements that may lead to avoiding or resisting mediation or at least being discontent with some aspects of it.

The second research question dealt with children's responses to parental monitoring of what they did online, ranging from parents' milder requests that children inform them about what they are doing on the internet to checking up on children's online activities. Here the age differences were striking partly because that growing maturity involved not just physical and mental developmental processes, but children's own changing social expectations. These expectations related to identity and the imperative to be independent (e.g. 'At this age I should be able to do this on my own') and to have a sense of becoming more responsible and earning trust – hence the fear of losing that trust. And in keeping with the growth of children's privacy noted in the sociological literature we see children discussing their desire to have more rights to privacy. While resistance to some parental interventions may relate more to the 'personal domain' (e.g. to managing relations with peers online, especially keeping that peer world separate from parents), more generally it appears to arise from expectations of having some (or more) personal space that parents should respect. Some of these themes help explain both critical evaluations of parental monitoring interventions and attempts to evade them.

The last research question concerned why many children choose not to confide voluntarily parents in regards to sensitive issues online, areas that may be considered risky by the adult world (and sometimes by children), and where parental guidance, and indeed rules, may exist. Here again the autonomy-supportive style of parenting might prove to be more successful, because it is clear how its opposite, punishing children if they are perceived (maybe wrongly) to be breaking a rule, or handling the matter in an insensitive way by becoming angry with or critical of them, can clearly inhibit children from talking to parents about some online experiences. But we can once again also see the social expectations associated with increasing maturity whereby children, especially older children, fear losing trust. This can make children wary of talking to parents about certain topics.

## Conclusions

The overall framework of this article is social constructionist, whereby children and parents are influenced by wider societal discourses about their roles and actions. But that construction is complex – it changes over time, as illustrated by children's greater autonomy, and has contradictory elements, such as (arguably) greater pressures on parents to manage their children's online risk experiences.

However, children are also agents and the goal of the *EU Kids Online* project generally and this article in particular, was to give them a voice. Thus, there was focus on, at various levels, children's evaluation of and reactions to (and indeed anticipation of) parental mediation. The children were invited to express their perspectives in their own words, albeit prompted by interviewers where the interaction in the interview may have some influence. Especially in the quotations, the readers can to some extent judge this for themselves. In general, data from the *EU Kids Online* survey can help us to understand the degree to which children are happy with or find difficulties with parental advice, parental monitoring, or parental support in the event of online problems. The aim of this article is to provide some insight into why this is the case, through appreciating how children make sense of their social worlds.

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